DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 175 785 SO 011 952

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TITLE Basic Skills Packet.
INSTITUTION Public Schools of Choice, New Haven, Conn.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 11 Jul 79
NOTE : For related documents, see SO 011 951-954
AVAILABLE FROM [illegible] School in the Community, 45 Nash Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06511 ($0.20)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alternative Schools; Basic Skills; Community Schools; Cooperative Planning; *Educational Alternatives; *Individualized Programs; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Mathematics; Reading Skills; Relevance (Education); Remedial Mathematics; *Remedial Programs; Remedial Reading; Secondary Education; *Skill Development; Team Teaching
IDENTIFIERS *High School in the Community; National Diffusion Network Programs; *Public Schools of Choice

ABSTRACT

The document describes the basic skills programs in reading and mathematics of the High School in the Community (HSC) in New Haven, Connecticut. HSC, designed to provide a choice of learning environments within the public school system, serves students dissatisfied with their previous school experience. Each student, on entering HSC, is screened regarding his/her math and reading skills. Those who demonstrate weaknesses in reading are channeled into one of two reading classes according to the degree to which they need help. Both classes use the Words in Color curriculum. Combinations of sounds are color coded so that once the code is known students can figure out any word in their speaking vocabulary even though they have never read it before. Classes are team-taught by math, social studies, and science teachers. The average gain is 1.5 years for each year of work in the program. Students weak in mathematics are counseled to take either "Basic Math" or "Survival Math Skills." Materials for both classes are largely teacher-developed with a strong emphasis on relating problem solving to real life experiences. Students tend to gain one year's skill with one year's work. Evaluations reveal that HSC students do at least as well cognitively as those in traditional schools and do significantly better than other students on tests in the affective domain. (KC)

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BASIC SKILLS PACKET

by Geoffrey Smith

SO 011 952

BASIC SKILLS

The Basic Skills aspect of the High School in the Community curriculum has been developed over the years in response to changes in the student population of the school. More and more of our students (not unusual for an inner city school) enter with lower and lower academic skills. Although we have continued to attract students of all ability levels, we have felt it necessary to design and implement some specific responses to those students with poor basic skills.

Every student, on entering HSC, is given a reading test and a math test. These are home-made instruments used to give only a rough approximation of a student's ability level. Students who do poorly on the math test, but who read fairly well, are encouraged to take a remedial math course (called "Survival Math Methods") which meets for 3 hours a day, five days a week, for eight weeks. Students who do poorly on the reading test are encouraged to take one of two remedial reading classes ("Reading, Writing, and Relating" or "Our Class") which also meet 3 hours each day.

Most courses, other than these math and reading classes, are heterogeneous in make-up. Students of all ability levels can work together or on individualized programs within the same class. We have found this to be the most successful way to deal with science and social studies skills. In addition, almost all of our classes are interdisciplinary and team taught, allowing for considerable diversity and flexibility of approach.

Reading

HSC uses a reading curriculum called Words In Color. This curriculum is a relatively new and, from the point of view of traditional teaching,

radical approach to the teaching of reading and writing. It is based on the observation that children who have taught themselves to speak have demonstrated intellectual powers far beyond those they are usually given credit for in school. Learning to read is a much less difficult task than learning to speak, and any child who can speak, see, and hear can learn to read if his/her demonstrated powers are taken into account.

This way of teaching reading is based on translating the spatial order of our written language (left to right) into the temporal order of our spoken language (before and after). The student develops ways to judge the sounds triggered by the signs of the written language and redevelops the powers of listening that he/she used as a baby in learning to talk. The 300-or-so combinations of letters that are used to represent the 50-or-so sounds of English are color-coded and arranged in logical order on wall charts for initial presentation, so that once the code is known, the student can figure out any word that is in his/her speaking vocabulary even though he/she has never read it before. The color code is used only for new words which are then immediately read and written in black and white.

Vowel sounds are the first ones introduced and are the keystone used in translating written words into speech. When the student has learned how to combine these with consonant sounds and listen to and judge the spoken product, he/she can begin to read. In this way, the student gradually learns to translate all of the sounds of English from some of the more common spellings of these sounds. The classroom activities are game-like and intellectually challenging. The teacher constantly uses feedback from the students to diagnos progress and adapt teaching styles and activities.

The absolute necessary ingredient to make all of this work is open-minded, enthusiastic, well-trained teachers. New teachers need to consult with each other and with experienced teachers regularly. During the first year or two

of teaching they need to be able to have expert training and refreshment several times a year if possible (weekend workshops after the initial 5-day summer one).

Naturally, students who have been through 8 or 9 years of schooling and have not really mastered reading tend to believe that they are incapable of becoming good readers. It is important to understand that students in this situation have been victimized by the school system, perhaps unintentionally, but certainly through no fault of their own. Consequently, we have to overcome their fear, reluctance, and hostility toward school before they can begin to unlock their own powers to learn to read and write. Such students are more difficult to work with than first grade beginning readers and tend to move more slowly. Many of them need to work on a one-to-one or two-to-one basis with a teacher at least until they get back in touch with their baby powers.

We have succeeded in surprising many of our students by showing them that they can learn to read and write well. A major function of the reading classes is to make students feel comfortable being in school. The teachers try hard to make students feel a part of the class and to make each individual in the class respect the contributions each other individual can make. Once the students realize that they will not be ridiculed for getting answers wrong, they can begin to deal with their own lack of reading and writing skills. Probably more than anything else, this acceptance of students as they are is the key to success of our program. Accepting students as they are includes recognizing both their strengths and weaknesses. But more importantly, we believe that teaching means helping each student to become aware of his/her own capabilities so that each can utilize his/her individual powers to overcome his/her individual lack of skills.

HSC is fortunate in having three experienced Words In Color teachers. We

use them in the following ways:

At the beginning of the academic year (and as new students are admitted throughout the year), each student is given a brief individual oral reading test. This is a series of 15 sentences of increasing difficulty. On the basis of their performance, students are roughly categorized as: (1) Non-readers, (2) Basic, (3) Low-intermediate, (4) High-intermediate, or (5) Advanced.

Students in Group 1 (and some in group 2 at times) are strongly urged to take the Words In Color course which we call "Reading, Writing, and Relating". This course continues for the entire year, although some students are able to move to other classes as they develop their reading skills. There are 10-20 students in this group. The Words In Color charts and books are the principal materials used in this class, supplemented by other materials such as easy-reading high-interest stories and plays. The class also works on math skills, since non-readers usually also are non-calculators, and in other academic areas. The class may be team taught with a math, science, or social studies teacher working part of the time with the reading teacher.

Students in Groups 2 and 3 (and some in Group 4 at times) are urged to take the other reading class (called "Our Class") which is team taught by a Words In Color teacher and a social studies teacher for the first semester. During the second semester the reading teacher teams with a math teacher for one quarter and a science teacher for the last quarter. There are up to 35 students in this class. The daily reading work in this class is taken from many sources (stories of city life and teen-age problems, writings about people of various nationalities, and so forth). The written exercises are composed by the teachers and include work based on Words In Color activities and on the reading for the day. The Words In Color teacher does oral work daily with all the students, in groups of 5 to 15, on the color-coded wall charts. As with the "Reading Writing, and Relating" class, students may move

out of this class as they develop their reading skill and their self-confidence, or they may move into the class for non-readers if that seems appropriate.

The third Words In Color teacher takes students from both of these classes for individual or small group work when they are having special difficulties of any kind.

In addition to the rough screening test initially given to all students, the Slossen Oral Reading Test is administered as soon as possible to all students in Groups 1, 2, and 3. In most cases this can be done during registration, before classes begin. Students scoring below 100 on the Slossen (below 5th grade reading level) are steered to the class for non-readers. Those scoring between 100 and 135 (5th to upper 6th grade level) are steered to the team taught reading class. Those above 135 but below 160 (upper 6th to 8th grade level) are given the suggestion of choosing that class if they would like to improve their reading and writing skills. For some students who are not tested during registration or who enter HSC after the beginning of the year, these classes are open for new members every four weeks.

We have been pleased with the results of this program. Those students who can be persuaded to come regularly to class often gain 2, 3, or 4 years of reading skill in the first year of concentrated work with Words In Color. The average gain is 1.5 years for each year of work in the program. This is particularly impressive when it is understood that these students have been progressing at approximately 1/3 that rate for their previous years in school.

Mathematics

Almost all of the math curriculum has been developed by the teachers at HSC. The emphasis is on individualizing the student's program in a way which best meets the needs of the student and the teacher.

At the beginning of each year every student is given a short placement test. On the basis of their scores, students are roughly categorized as: (1) Non-calculators, need work on whole number operations; (2) Basic, need to work on fraction, decimal, and percent skills; (3) Low-intermediate, could use some review of basic skills, but probably ready for algebra; (4) High-intermediate, ready for algebra or geometry; (5) Advanced, have demonstrated competency in elementary algebra and geometry.

Students in Group 1 are urged to take a regular remedial math class which we call "Basic MAth". This class meets for 50 minutes every day and continues for the entire year. Students may move in or out of the class if that seems appropriate every eight weeks. Students in Group 2 (and sometimes in Group 3) are strongly encouraged to take the math course which we call "Survival Math Methods". This course continues for four weeks (3 hours a day), then breaks for four weeks, then meets for a second four week period. This cycle is repeated during the second semester. The class is team taught by two math teachers. The materials used are almost all teacher developed, and there is a strong emphasis on relating problem-solving to real-life situations. The first four week period the primary goal is mastery of fractional operations. The second four weeks the class concentrates on decimal fractions and percentage work. A major goal throughout both math classes is to make each student feel comfortable with math problems and more confident in dealing with mathematical situations.

It is not unusual for students in Groups 1 and 2 to also be non-readers. In this situation they are asked to take the reading class, and to deal with their math skills only after becoming more proficient readers. Both of the two remedial reading classes offer math credit during the year, or students may in some cases move from the reading class to a second semester math class.

Students in Groups 3 and 4 are urged to take either an Algebra I,

Algebra II, or Geometry class, depending on their background and interest level. Students in Group 5 are strongly encouraged to continue their math studies in whatever way seems most appropriate.

All students in the "Basic Math" and "Survival Math Methods" classes are given a pre- and post- diagnostic test, the Wide Range Achievement Test (Arithmetic, Level 1 and Level 2). We have been pleased, although not overjoyed, at the results. Overall, students do gain about one year's skill with one year's work. This is perhaps better than it at first sounds, considering that they have been gaining at about half that rate for their previous eight or nine years of schooling. Those students who participate fully in the program sometimes gain as much as 3 or 4 years of math skill.

Other Academic Areas

The curriculum in all classes is organized to reflect the particular academic and social skills that each individual brings to the class. We use a Skill Check List for each student to help identify the level and appropriate content of the courses offered. The team taught, interdisciplinary approach we use makes it easy to cross subject boundaries and to reinforce learning with applications from several fields.

Repeated evaluations of our students have shown that they do at least as well as students in traditional schools on all measures of cognitive growth. Our students do significantly better than other students on tests in the affective domain. We are particularly pleased that we have gained these results working with those students who come to us with poor basic skills.